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Islamic Fascism?

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President George W. Bush and the neoconservative handlers of his administration have added a new bogeyman to their long and evolving list of enemies: "Islamic fascism," also called "Islamofascism." This wanton flinging of the word "fascism" in reference to radical movements and leaders of the Muslim world, however, is not only inaccurate and oxymoronic, but it is, indeed, also ironic. Of course, it is also offensive and inflammatory and, therefore, detrimental to international understanding and stability.

Fascism is a specific category or concept of statecraft that is based on specific social and historical developments or phenomena. It cannot be conjured up by magic or portrayed by capricious definitions. It arises under conditions of an advanced industrialized economy, that is, under particular historical circumstances. It is a product of big business that is brought about by market or profitability imperatives. It is, in a sense, an "emergency" instrument (a metaphorical fire fighter, if your will) in the arsenal of powerful economic interests that is employed during crisis or critical times in order to remove or extinguish "obstacles" to unhindered operations of big business.

When profitability expectations of giant corporations are threatened or not met under ordinary economic conditions, powerful corporate interests resort to extraordinary measures to meet those expectations. To this end, they mobilize state power in order to remove what they perceive as threats to unrestricted business operations. Therefore, as the 1928 Encyclopedia Italiana puts it, "Fascism should more appropriately be called 'corporatism' because it is a merger of state and corporate power."

While some researchers have attributed this classic definition of fascism to the Italian philosopher Giovanni Gentile[1], others believe that it came directly from the horse's mouth, Benito Mussolini, the prototypical fascist.[2]

Where big money plays a crucial role in the election of politicians and government functionaries, state power is almost always a proxy for corporate power or big business. Under "normal" or "healthy" economic circumstances, however, that agency role of the state is often subtle and submerged, as under such circumstances business and government leaders can afford to rely on the "invisible hand" of the market mechanism to perform its putative magic work.

But as soon as an expanding economic cycle turns to a declining one, and the declining cycle becomes dangerously persistent or chronic, business and government leaders dispel all pretensions of deferring business or economic affairs to the "invisible hand" of the market mechanism and rush to the rescue of the market system with all kinds of "extra-economic" or policy schemes of "restructuring" and crisis-management.

Such interventionist policies on behalf of corporate interests in pursuit of higher profits would include, for example, business-friendly changes in labor, environmental, taxation, and anti-trust laws. They would also include changes in rules governing international trade and investment through multilateral institutions such as the IMF and WTO in favor of powerful transnational corporations.

While these corporate welfare schemes are characterized by such apparently benign labels as restructuring, downsizing, streamlining, or supply-side/neoliberal economics, they are, in fact, legal, political, institutional and, at times, military instruments of class struggle that are employed by business and government leaders in pursuit of profitability, often at the expense of working people.

These neoliberal corporate welfare schemes contain elements or seeds of potentially fascistic economic strategies. The germs of potential or latent fascism, however, can remain dormant as long as implementation of such "restructuring" schemes do not face serious resistance from labor, or menacing pressure from below; that is, as long as corporate welfare policies can be carried out by peaceful political and/or legal means (as opposed to police or military means). This has been, more or less, the case with the United States since the early 1980s where corporate and government leaders have since then "peacefully" carried out a successful supply-side or neoliberal economic policy that has resulted in a drastic redistribution of national resources in favor of the wealthy.

But when major business interests find "normal" restructuring policies of corporate profitability insufficient, or when severe resistance or pressure from below tends to make "peaceful" imposition of such policies difficult or impossible, corporate and government leaders would not hesitate to employ police and military force (i.e., emergency or fascistic measures) to carry out the "necessary reforms" in pursuit of corporate prosperity.

Such emergency steps would include union busting, strike breaking, tax breaks for the wealthy, cuts in social spending, severe austerity economic measures, and the like. To undermine resistance to this belt-tightening package of economic fascism, corporate state will then find it necessary to embark on the corresponding package of political fascism: wearing down on civil liberties and republican principles, manipulating electoral and voting processes, undermining constitutional and democratic values, disregarding human rights and international treaties, and so on.

Imposition of such anti-democratic policies will, in turn, require scapegoating, fear-mongering, enemy-manufacturing and, of course, war. While domestic dissent is portrayed as treason, external non-compliance is depicted as threat to "our national interests" because, according to this logic, other countries cannot remain neutral or independent: "they are either with us or against us"!

Xenophobic or chauvinistic nationalism, superficial or pseudo populism, and worship of military power are major hallmarks of fascism. Corporate state propaganda machine would feverishly promote these values because, among other things, such values resonate with ordinary citizens and help mobilize the masses behind the agenda of fascism.

Successful mobilization of the masses behind the program of fascism is, of course, a most ironic and perverse type of social development: the victims (the middle, lower-middle, poor, and working classes) are driven to rise up in their crazed desperation

to support the victimizer, the big business, through the agency of fascism. This is, of course, pivotal to the success of fascism.

This brief description of the characteristics of fascism is more than theoretical; it also reflects the actual developments that gave birth to the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy. Fascist dictators in both countries, Hitler and Mussolini, were elevated to power by major business conglomerates.

In Germany, for example, as anemic economic conditions of the 1920s further deteriorated in the early 1930s, powerful business interests put pressure on the Weimar Republic to help them carry out a brutal economic austerity package: cutting wages and social spending, on the one hand, giving generous state subsidies and tax breaks to big business, on the other. Although the Weimar Republic did offer help and took some steps in this direction, German corporate leaders found such measures insufficient and unsatisfactory.

Thus, as Michael Parenti points out, "By 1930, most of the tycoons had concluded that the Weimar Republic no longer served their needs and was too accommodating to the working class. They greatly increased their subsidies to Hitler, propelling the Nazi party onto the national stage." Parenti further writes, "Business tycoons supplied the Nazis with generous funds for fleets of motor cars and loudspeakers to saturate the cities and villages of Germany, along with funds for Nazi party organizations, youth groups, and paramilitary forces. In the July 1932 campaign, Hitler had sufficient funds to fly to fifty cities in the last two weeks alone." [3]

Like Adolf Hitler of Germany, Italy's Benito Mussolini was brought to power by big capital: "To maintain profit levels, the large landowners and industrialists would have to slash wages and raise prices. The state in turn would have to provide them with massive subsidies and tax exemptions. To finance this corporate welfarism, the populace would have to be taxed more heavily, and social services and welfare expenditures would have to be drastically cut." [4]

To undermine the workers' and peasants' resistance to these brutal austerity measures, the corporate state would have to curtail civil liberties and eliminate democratic rights that helped the masses defend their modest living conditions. "The solution was to smash their unions, political organizations, and civil liberties. Industrialists and big landowners wanted someone at the helm who could break the power of organized workers and farm laborers and impose a stern order on the masses. For this task Benito Mussolini, armed with his gangs of Blackshirts, seemed the likely candidate."

In 1922, the "Fedrazione Industriale," consisting of the leaders of industry, banking, and agribusiness corporations, "met with Mussolini to plan the 'March on Rome,' contributing 20 million lire to the undertaking. With the additional backing of Italy's top military officers and police chiefs, the fascist 'revolution' – really a coup d'etat – took place." [5]

Although the inner-connections between economics, politics, and cultural facets of fascism may not be as clear-cut or precise as correlations in, for example, natural sciences, they are nonetheless subject to specific social and historical laws, dynamics, and developments. In general, and in broad outlines, fascism arises as an emergency reaction, or crisis-management response, by big business to threats posed to its interests, threats that cannot be fended off by the "usual" or "normal"

maneuverings of the capitalist state. Protracted and menacingly long economic crises tend to be breeding grounds for the rise of fascism.

In response to such chronic recessionary cycles, business and government leaders would, first, try "normal" restructuring or streamlining policies to stem further economic decline and restore profitability. These would include implementation of capital-friendly fiscal and monetary policies; dilution of health, safety, and environmental standards; weakening or undermining business regulations and anti-trust laws; and so on. But if the anemic economy does not respond to such "ordinary" neoliberal economic measures (and social tensions continue to mount as a result), the corporate state would then not hesitate to resort to "extraordinary" measures of economic restructuring. With varying degrees or intensities, such "extraordinary" steps would entail elements of fascistic politics and policies.

It must be pointed out here that the emergence of fascism from long periods of economic and social crises is not inevitable. For example, while the depression period of the late 1920s and early 1930s led to the rise of fascism in Europe, it gave birth to the New Deal reforms in the United States. It could as well have led to the rise of socialism in either place, especially in Europe. President Roosevelt's famous statement (in response to opposition by some ruling circles to the New Deal package) that "we need these reforms if we want to avert revolution" succinctly captured the fluidity of the U.S. social developments of the time.

Historians overwhelmingly agree that a major force behind the corporate drive to fascism in Europe was a desire to avert socialism. The late Rosa Luxemburg's warning on the eve of the rise of fascism that Europe was at the cross roads of "either socialism or barbarism" presciently captured the volatility of the European socioeconomic circumstances of the time.

These experiences (as well as the economic logic and theory of social developments) indicate that the outcome of deep socioeconomic crises is not predetermined; it all depends on the balance of power between the contending interests and the outcome of class struggle.

Now, it is obvious that, in light of the characteristics of fascism as a specific socio-historical phenomenon, the Bush administration's labeling of radical Islamic movements and leaders as fascist, or "Islamofascism," is sheer nonsense. It betrays either blatant demagoguery, or shameful ignorance, or most probably, both.

For one thing, the economic foundation of fascism, an advanced industrialized market economy, is absent in most areas or countries of fundamentalist Islamic movements and/or radical Muslim leaders. For another, militant Muslim leaders such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran, Hassan Nasrallah of Lebanon, Hamas leaders of Palestine, and Muslim Brotherhood leaders of Egypt are known as people's leaders or fighters, not agents and collaborators of big business, as would be the case with fascist or fascistic figures and characters. They are, indeed, often in collision, not collusion, with big business and corrupt establishments of their communities or countries.

Furthermore, most radical Muslim movements of recent years have tended to push for more, not less, political democracy, as this would lead to their gaining political power and independence from foreign powers and their (comprador) local allies. That is, indeed, how, for example, Hamas won in the recent Palestinian elections in the

occupied territories. That was also how Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became the President of Iran (despite the vehement opposition by the corrupt and moneyed establishment). Iraqi and Lebanese Shia Muslims have equally been keen on free elections. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood has been trying for years to bring about free and transparent elections in that country, only to be obstructed by the regime of (the life-time) President Hosni Mubarak, the treasured ally of the United States.

Radical movements and individuals of the Muslim world maybe called fundamentalist, populist, nationalist, or terrorist; but they cannot be called fascist. As Marc Ash recently put it, "Blowing up an airliner full of passengers is barbaric and completely unacceptable, regardless of the objectives of those involved, but it really doesn't fit the definition of fascism." (Even if we assume, for a moment, that such wild acts of desperation can be called fascism, still they cannot be called Islamic fascism; just as the rise of fascism in Europe was not, and could not, be called Christian fascism.) Fascism "is not an isolated act of madness, it is a coordinated act of state. All the while private corporations profit wildly." [6]

But while radical groupings and individuals of the Muslim world (or anywhere else in the world, for that matter) cannot be called fascist, the neoconservative/corporate-run Bush administration does bear some major (though low-level) hallmarks of fascism. These include a tendency to curtail civil liberties and retreat from democratic principles, a penchant to view the peoples and nations of the world as "allies" and "enemies," a preference to boost the power and fortunes of big business at the expense of the needy and working classes, a desire to manufacture enemies and to invent scapegoats in order to justify wars of aggression, and so on.

This is not to say that President Bush or the neoconservative handlers of his administration can be called full-blown or mature fascists; but that their ranks, their circles of power, and their politico-philosophical agenda are infested with insidious germs of fascism that, if not contained, can develop to full-fledged fascism.

While it is important to identify and to warn against the signs of latent or embryonic fascism in and around the Bush administration, it is also necessary to point to the emergence or proliferation of a number of hopeful signs and forces that are evolving to counter the fascistic tendencies of neoconservatism. What are those counteracting forces?

One such sign of optimism is the fact that as the neoconservative agenda of the Bush administration is increasingly exposed as fraudulent, public support for that agenda is dwindling among the American people. As noted, agitation and mobilization of the masses around the flag and on the ground of pseudo-nationalism by means of disinformation and deceit is a major secret of the success of fascism. Rising uneasiness of the American people with the neoconservative-Bush agenda of war and militarism is a hopeful sign that further implementation of that ominous agenda might not be as easy in the future as it has been in the past six years.

Another indication of optimism is that even the military is gradually questioning the jingoistic plans of the neoconservative civilian leadership. Tensions between the professional military experts and civilian leadership, pejoratively called militaristic chicken hawks, festering ever since the invasion of Iraq, have now been heightened over the administration's policy of an aerial military strike against Iran. While civilian militarists, headed by Vice President Cheney and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, are said to have drawn plans to bomb Iran, many senior commanders are openly

questioning the wisdom of such plans.[7]

Third, and perhaps more importantly, serious tensions and disagreements are developing within the ruling elite over aggressive unilateral policies of the neoconservative Bush administration. Cross-party opposition within the ruling factions to the neoconservative agenda, latent ever since they took over U.S. foreign policy, has recently become quite intense. The so-called realists and/or multilateralists are increasingly expressing dismay at how the neoconservative policies of the administration are undermining not only worldwide U.S. credibility but also its geopolitical and economic interests.

A major part of the disagreements within the ruling circles is due to the fact that their economic interests are impacted differently by the foreign policies of the Bush administration. While major beneficiaries of military capital, that is, armaments industries and related businesses that benefit from war and militarism, support the administration's policies of unilateral wars of aggression, non-military, or civilian, transnational capitalists do not favor such policies as they tend to cost them foreign markets and investment opportunities.

The Powerful interests that are vested in the military capital or war industries include not only the giant Pentagon contractors such as Boeing, Northrop Grumman, McDonald Douglas, or Raytheon, but also a whole host of war-related smaller businesses that have recently spun around the Pentagon and the Homeland Security apparatus in order to cash in on the Pentagon's escalating budget. All these war-based industries and related business have been reaping the benefits of a war-time bonanza thanks to drastic increases in military spending under President Bush – officially a 45 percent increase in real terms over what he inherited in 2001. Not surprisingly, these beneficiaries of "war dividends" are the major supporters, and often also the architects, of the Bush administrations foreign policy. They are the real (though often submerged) forces behind the façade of the cabal of neoconservative activists, their militaristic policies, and their demagogic rhetoric of democracy.[8]

But while the interests that are vested in the business of war have been handsomely benefiting from the Bush administration's policies of war and militarism, Thousands of non-military transnational businesses have suffered from losses of trade and investment opportunities in global markets as a result of those policies. From their point of view, the neoconservative policies of military buildup and unilateral wars of choice have increasingly become economic burdens not only because they devour a disproportionately large share of national resources, but also because such adventurous operations tend to create instability in international markets and subvert long-term global investment. Furthermore, the resentment and hostility that unprovoked aggressions have generated in foreign lands have also created consumer backlash against brands that are closely identified with the United States: Marlboro cigarettes, America Online (AOL), McDonald's, Coca-Cola and Pepsi, Pizza Hut, American Airlines, Exxon-Mobil, and many more.[9]

Losses of trade and investment opportunities in foreign markets have prompted a broad spectrum of non-military business interests to form coalitions of trade associations that are designed to lobby foreign policy makers against unilateral U.S. military aggressions abroad. One such anti-militarist alliance of American businesses is USA*ENGAGE. It is a coalition of nearly 700 small and large businesses, agriculture groups and trade associations working to seek alternatives to the proliferation of unilateral U.S. foreign policy actions and to promote the benefits of

U.S. engagement abroad.

The coalition's statement of principles points out, "American values are best advanced by engagement of American business and agriculture in the world, not by ceding markets to foreign competition. Helping train workers, building roads, telephone systems, and power plants in poorer nations, promoting free enterprise – these activities improve the lives of people worldwide and support American values." [10]

While these positive developments (erosion of public support, hesitation of the professional military brass, and disagreements and tensions within the ruling elite) are hopeful signs that the power and influence of the Bush administration and his neoconservative allies are rapidly declining, they do not mean that these champions of unilateral wars and militarism can no longer inflict serious damage to international peace and stability (for example, by a reckless bombing of Iran). One should never discount the dangerous reactions of bullies when they find themselves against the wall: attack.

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